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The 25 Best Barbecue Joints in Dallas, According to Local Pitmasters

Wagyu beef brisket is just the beginning.

By [Steven Lindsey](#)

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Pecan Lodge

Few topics—besides religion, politics, football, and Tex-Mex—have the ability to bring people together for several choruses of “Kum Ba Yah.” Or cause a heated argument worthy of Jerry Springer quite like BBQ. In Texas, it’s a passion with no limits. A topic with endless points of debate. A hobby that can turn into a restaurant empire.



You see, with barbecue, there are really no wrong answers when it comes to questions of taste. Take brisket, the superstar of Texas BBQ, for instance. Some people love a heavy black bark on theirs. Others prefer a dry rub over a wet one. Some have a preference for meat smoked over post oak instead of pecan or hickory. And quite a few people are just as enthusiastic about a brisket-stuffed baked potato at a big barbecue chain restaurant as those die-hard fans who camp out in line for hours before a pitmaster begins slicing his first meat of the day. It really comes down to a matter of preference and similar to wine, if you like it, you like it. Make no apologies.

But there are individuals who live and breathe barbecue—and have the smoke-scented wardrobe to prove it—armed with insights into the artful craft of smoking meat that lead to a better appreciation of every mouthwatering bite. Over the past 13 months, we've chatted with a variety of North Texas BBQ pros to get their take on the barbecue scene across Dallas-Fort Worth (and even a hundred or so miles beyond) to find out which joints they prefer to eat at when not fanning their own flames.

The Justice League-worthy assemblage of BBQ superheroes includes Loro Dallas pitmaster Judith Covarrubias who began her culinary journey in fine dining; Parry Avenue Barbecue Company's pitmaster, Leo Morales; Ten50 BBQ's William Weisiger of in Richardson, a pitmaster with more than 30 years of experience; Jill Bergus, owner of Lockhart Smokehouse in Oak Cliff and Plano; Chad Session, pitmaster at Royce City's Smoke Sessions Barbecue; Michael Lane, an experienced fine-dining chef turned pitmaster at OAK'D Handcrafted BBQ; artisan and founder of AJ's Custom Cookers, AJ Ramirez, who's manufactured smokers for several local barbecue joints, including two from the list below (Vaqueros Texas Bar-B-Q and Panther City Barbecue); and two husband-and-wife teams, Justin and Diane Fourton, owners of Pecan Lodge in Deep Ellum, and Travis and Emma Heim from Fort Worth's Heim BBQ. And believe you me, they sure had plenty to say.

"I think the BBQ scene in North Texas is as good as anywhere in the world. You see the full spectrum of cooking styles displayed, from direct-heat, wood-coal grilling to cold smoking/curing and whole-animal cooking," says Pecan Lodge's Justin Fourton. "The quality and cuts of meat are unrivaled—it's not uncommon to find hand-stuffed sausage

links, giant beef ribs, prime rib, wild game, and other exotic cuts. Each joint has its own vibe and all the locals have a favorite spot or enjoy a regular rotation of a few select places.”

Weisiger and Bergus agree with Fourton, describing the Dallas-Fort Worth BBQ scene as a rich melting pot (or pit, as the case may be) of cultural and regional influences: “East Coast whole hog to West Coast tri-tip, Texas-style brisket to Kansas City’s sauced burnt ends, and spice profiles from South America to South Korea. If you want it, North Texas has it.”

Covarrubius echoes that sentiment.

“North Texas BBQ is exciting because you’re not expected to stick to any one specific style of Texas BBQ. You get to pick and choose from all the other great Texas regional styles without upsetting anyone. And you can get creative with fusing BBQ with other cuisines, like we do at Loro,” she says. “As a native from El Paso, I’m also excited about the increasing influence of Mexican and Tex-Mex cuisines in North Texas BBQ.”

The first smoke shack on record dates back to 1878, though Texans and those who lived here long before we were a state likely have been dabbling in the meat-fire-smoke arts for long before that. As people migrated to Texas over the decades, they brought with them their own barbecue styles that influenced the BBQ we enjoy across Texas today.

“We have so many different styles within an easy driving radius, it’s a great area for a BBQ tour,” Bergus adds. “We all do something a little—or a lot—different. Also, with great BBQ, it’s the atmosphere as much as the food.”

Sometimes that atmosphere is a roadhouse-style restaurant in the middle of a small town or on the patio under a canopy of shade trees. Other times it’s a parking lot in the shadow of Downtown Dallas or at a live music festival where a BBQ food truck has set up shop for a few hours. And whether you’re eating juicy brisket with a knife and fork in a

restaurant with white tablecloths (a really bad idea, by the way) or off a sheet of butcher paper with your fingers, great barbecue transcends the need for formality, yet rises to levels of culinary sophistication that could justify the presence of a sommelier, too.

“When we opened our food truck in February 2015 there wasn’t much of a ‘scene.’ Pecan Lodge in Dallas was doing great BBQ, but most of North Texas was still old-school places that hadn’t changed for 40-plus years,” recalls Travis Heim of Heim BBQ. “The influence of guys like Aaron Franklin and the craft BBQ scene out of Austin changed all that, and a ton of new food trucks in Fort Worth are doing really good BBQ. It’s amazing, but I still feel like Fort Worth BBQ in particular doesn’t get the credit it should.”

Aaron Franklin, famous for his temple of ’cue, Franklin BBQ in Austin, comes up a lot in this crowd. Last summer, the legend himself joined Dallas’ restaurant community with the local outpost launch of his Asian-influenced smokehouse joint-venture, Loro, with Uchi’s Tyson Cole.

“Aaron really is the godfather—he’s an expert at what he does and a lot of people look up to him,” says OAK'D Handcrafted BBQ frontman Michael Lane. Gifted as Franklin is, however, Lane acknowledges that an irresistible hunk of Grade A Texas brisket’s true worth doesn’t stem solely from the hands that smoked it low-and-slow, but rather from the community it ultimately sustains. “Barbecue is American food, an iconic way of eating,” he adds. “It doesn’t matter if you’re in a restaurant or hanging out with your family at home, it’s fellowship cuisine and that’s the way we want people to feel.”

It’s a lifestyle that sucks people in when they least expect it, too.

“I started cooking BBQ as a hobby after moving to San Marcos, Texas. I was introduced to Smitty’s Market in Lockhart, TX and fell in love,” Sessions says. “I quickly became addicted to smoking meats, and after a long period of time became good at it. I already worked in the restaurant business and was surprised when I started making money, so my wife and I decided to move back to North Texas, and started a BBQ trailer.”

It’s a familiar story that always features different characters, but offers the same happy ending: delicious food to bring people together from all different backgrounds over one common love.

So if you’re ready to go on your own BBQ journey through North Texas, we’ve assembled

a list of 25 favorite spots from our collection of experts, plus a few of our own go-to spots that shouldn't be missed for one tasty reason or another. Keep in mind that some of the smaller operations might only be open a few hours a couple of days per week—and many places sell out of popular items early—so before you make the drive, check the hours at each spot to ensure you have greasy fingers and a stained shirt clearly in your future.



Parry Avenue Barbecue Company

How to book: Stop by for first come, first served seating, call 1-855-QUE-1050 and order online for take-out, or get delivery via Grubhub and Favor.



Hutchins BBQ McKinney

Hutchins Barbeque

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McKinney, Frisco

The Hutchins family's love affair with barbecue dates back to at least 1978 when patriarch Roy commissioned his very first pit. And today, they operate as one of the most popular brands in the northern suburbs. "They do a very good job, and they're good people," says OAK'D's Lane. Fellow pitmasters Bergus and Emma Heim recommend the "Phenomenal" weekend-only Twinkies, which aren't actually the indestructible pastries of yore but large jalapeño peppers stuffed with cream cheese and wrapped in thick-cut bacon (no joke). "Their Texas Twinkies are the best on the planet without a doubt," adds Chad Sessions, pitmaster Smoke Sessions Barbecue. Daily fixtures include Prime brisket and jalapeño-cheddar smoked sausage, which Emma

Heim similarly vouches for.

How to book: Stop by for first come, first served seating or call 972-377-2046 and order online for take-out.



Heim Barbecue | Photo by Robert Strickland

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